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A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE THEORIES OF THE AN-
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VIEWS HELD BY THE TALMUDISTS.

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By CHARLES D. SPIVAK, M.D.

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MENSTRUATION,

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE THEORIES OF THE
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BY CHARLES D. SPIVAK, M.D.

IT is probable that Eve, the mother of all the living, used for a napkin a piece of the same material out of which she cut her first apron. The Bible, however, makes no mention of the menstrual function having been performed by Eve. Mustitatus, in his work on "Diseases of Women," published in 1793 (quoted by Dr. C. H. Schauer, in *Monatschrift für Geburtskunde*, 1855), gives the following theory of the origin of menstruation:

After Eve had tasted of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she suddenly felt the "tickling" of the sexual appetite. She beguiled the innocent simpleton Adam to partake of this aphrodisiac, and thus the first sexual intercourse took place. All the future generations were stained by that sin, and the Eternal, therefore, afflicted her with the menstrual flow, as a forewarning to woman-kind of the *Fidei Communs*.

I do not vouch for the veracity of this story, but I cannot see any reason why our mother, Eve, should have been spared the inconveniences which all her daughters had and have to undergo.

¹ Prize Thesis at Jefferson Medical College in 1890.

A few years ago Dr. King (*American Journal of Obstet.*, August, 1875), tried to cast a doubt upon the "flowers" of Rachel (Gen. xxxi, 35), being blinded both by his preconceived theory of menstruation being a pathological function, and by ignorance of Hebrew. Had he read the passage in the Bible where it is related how Sarah ridiculed the idea of her giving birth to a child after "it has ceased to be with her after the manner of women"¹ (Gen. xviii, 2), he would have had one argument less in support of his moss-begrown theory, and thus spared himself a part of the scathing criticism (*Amer. Pract.*, 1875, No. 12) of an opponent, who can as readily preach a sermon as solve a knotty problem in obstetrics, and who, above all, "thinks clear and sees straight," as Prof. Bartholow is wont to say to his class.

There is nothing new under the sun. Dr. King's theory is not of the first dye; it is only a modification of the theory of Mustitamus above mentioned. The difference lies only in the explanation of the origin of the pathology, not in the pathology itself. Mustitamus ascribes menstruation to the direct interference of a higher power, a *punishment* for a *sin*. Dr. King argues that civilization is at the bottom of

¹ In both instances are used words which originally mean way or path. In the story of Sarah is used the word Orach, and in that of Rachel, Derech. Both roots are translated by Buxtorf and Gesenius by "Via" and "Iter," and used figuratively in the sense of "manner," "custom." ("Via, Iter; metaphoricè: consuetudo." Buxt.) It is strange that the author of the article on menstruation in the "Nouveau Dictionnaire de Medicin," by Jaccoud, did not know of this passage, and begins his article with the following absurd premises: "At no epoch (he means in ancient times) was there ever recognized that the menstrual flow indicates the time of puberty, and its cessation the end of the reproductive faculty." The author ought to read the Bible.

the evil, and nature *punishes* all *sins* against the laws of health. Not much difference, to be sure. Dr. King may shake hands with the venerable ghost of Mustitamus; they are brethren in faith.

However, Dr. King is not an exception in the history of the development of theories of menstruation. There is not one ancient theory, however unphilosophical and illogical, which has not found adherents, or, to borrow an ecclesiastical expression, revivalists in the present century. Hippocrates taught that menstruation is a necessity to women on account of the structure of their bodies, which is porous and sponge-like. The body, therefore, takes up greedily all the fluids from the abdomen, and, should there be no channel or outlet, like that of menstruation, for the discharge of superfluous liquid, women would either burst or dissolve away. This theory has taken another shape in the hands of a modern scientist, M. Dechaux (*Gaz. Hebdom. de Med. et Chirur.*, 1875, No. 49). Lymphatism is the name given to this transmigrated theory. Dechaux maintains that a superabundance of lymph and serum is the *état naturel* of women. As a logical consequence of this "limpy and quasi serious" theory, he tearfully begs his brethren in profession not to touch any case of leucorrhœa or uterine catarrh, as it is nothing but natural for women to exude such matter.

The celestial bodies, in olden times, were appointed to do some extra work outside of their routine business of ruling by day and night. Thus, fair Luna was supposed to have dominion over the uterus, and to directly influence the periodicity of the monthly flow. In the second half of this century men of undisputable learning have taken up the subject anew, and, strange to say, arrived at the same conclusions (Strohl, *Gaz. Med. de Strassb.*, 1861, No. 6).

The notion entertained by all the Oriental nations, that women are unclean during the period of menstruation, gave rise to the custom of Turkish women to bathe three times a day in the menses; to wearing of colored laces by the women of Angola; to the building of special dwellings for menstruating women among the Persians (?) ("Histoire General de Voyage," vol. II, p. 240, quoted in "Darstellung der Biblischen Krankheiten"); to the seven cleansing days of the Hebrews, and even to the gentility of the Kalmuks, who do not degrade themselves by touching their wives when the latter are "unwell" (Palos, Sammlung, "Hist. Nachforsch. über manche Volkst.," quote *Ibid*). This barbaric notion, the direct result of a more savage notion of the inferiority of women in general, has undergone a remarkable transformation in the skilful hands of Osiander, Burdach, Testa, and others (quoted in "Alte und Moderne Theorien der Menstruation," *Monatschrift für Geburtskunde*, 1855). It was found that women generate more carbonic acid gas than men, and, furthermore, that their lungs are a trifle smaller; ergo as the superfluous CO_2 has to be eliminated somehow, the learned have decided that the uterus shall do the work. Thus the uterus was promoted to the high office of supplementary lung. The clouds were dispelled, and the good men, having thrown off a great responsibility, felt relieved.

Is not this lung-uterus theory but an evolution of the Oriental notion of purification, dressed and served with all the paraphernalia of the modern scientific vocabulary?

The most venerable theory is the "plethoric." A long list of distinguished men in science, from Galen to the middle of this century, can be made of those who adhered to this theory; some contending for the original idea of a "general plethora," and others

jealously defending the existence of a "local plethora."

There are still others, the malcontents, who lay all this trouble of menstruation at the door of "civilization." "Mankind has degenerated," they wail, and, *à la* Rousseau, they pine for a state of society where napkins shall be unknown, and staining be no more.

Great Mustitamus! Thou wast right; there is nothing worse than bad society: the company of Eve caused the fall of Adam.

Having briefly, and in a cursory way, stated the principal ancient theories of menstruation, worthy of the name, I shall approach the main subject of this essay, which aims to present, for the first time, I think, both the theory of menstruation, as it was understood by the Rabbis of the Talmud, as well as a brief summary of their observations of this phenomenon.

I shall preface it by a few words: It seems to me, as far as my limited knowledge goes, that there is at present a tendency among some obstetricians toward discarding and throwing overboard the theory that fathers ovulation upon menstruation—a theory which is held by the majority of scientists of this day.¹ If

¹ Prof. Parvin, in his work, "Science and Art of Obstetrics," after reviewing the principal theories of menstruation, both those of historical and scientific value, takes up the arguments of the opponents to the "ovulation theory," and proves them to be untenable. In summing up the subject, Dr. Parvin said:

"It is in the highest degree *probable* that there is a connection between ovulation and menstruation. At the same time, it must be admitted that the two may be distinct—the one occurring without the other, though they are usually associated."

Prof. Parvin mentions (*Ibid* 102) Dr. John Goodman as advancing a theory that menstruation is dependent upon a law

I am not mistaken, Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi, in her admirable work, "The Question of Rest for Women During Menstruation," has shown for the first time that all the functions of women flow in a periodical wave-like rise and fall of their vital energy. I cannot do better than to use her own words :

"As the menstrual period represents the climax in the development of a surplus of nutritive force, we should expect to find a rhythmic wave of nutrition gradually rising from a minimum point just after menstruation to a maximum just before the next flow."

Thus, Dr. Jacobi teaches us that the menstrual flow is but a local expression of a complicated rhythmic process which is silently and mysteriously walking throughout the female organism.

I cannot refrain from quoting the following from the same work, which is a summary of her theory :

"It is to the development of a supplemental wave of nutrition in the woman, in which it intersects the waves of individual nutrition that are due most of the peculiarities of the female organism, and of its activity, and not to the mere existence of reproductive organs."

It could hardly be expected that the sages of the Talmud, without the thermometer, sphygmograph, and other modern scientific appliances and facilities at their command, could have arrived at conclusions which have even a slight resemblance to that of Dr. Jacobi. Nevertheless, the Talmudists, like the poet Goethe, of whom Emerson said that "He sees at every pore, and has a certain gravitation towards

of monthly periodicity, which must be something akin to the theory advanced by Dr. Jacobi. As I did not read Dr. Goodman's book, I give the priority of the theory to Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi, on the principle of "ladies first,"

truth," and that "Eyes are better, on the whole, than telescopes and microscopes" (representative men, Goethe, or the writer)—the Talmudists, I say, had a vague idea of the theory, a glimpse of the truth—if truth it be at all.

The theory held by the Rabbis, among whom R. Meir was the principal exponent, can be expressed in the following words:

The menstrual blood is the production of an extra nutritive material in the female economy, which is discharged periodically when of no use, but which is converted into milk when the woman becomes pregnant, which explains the cessation of the flow during pregnancy and lactation. (Mishna Bechoroth, sec. ii, m. 9; Nidda Babli, p. 72; Nidda Yerushalmi, p. 50; Midrash Rabba and Midrash Thanchuma, section Ki-Thazriah.)

Rabbi Meir, who is quoted as authority in all the above treatises, and who expressed this theory after the Talmudical way, in a condensed sentence of four words, *Hadam neëchar venaaseh chalab*—"The blood coagulates and becomes milk"—may have said it without being conscious of the great theory he propounded. But, who can doubt the striking similarity between his theory and that of Dr. Jacobi, expressed somewhere else in the above named book:

"The woman buds as surely and as incessantly as the plant, continually generating not only the reproductive cells, but also the nutritive material, without which this would be useless."

It seems to me they (the Rabbis) reasoned logically in basing their theory upon the relation of menstruation and lactation; and, should even this theory of a "supplemental wave of nutrition," which is now gaining hold over the scientific world (Vratch, Nos. 50 and 51, 1889), prove to be groundless, it is, nevertheless,

remarkable that simple men who lived two thousand years ago, and who studied menstruation unlike Raciborski, "merely or chiefly in the library," or, as we Russians say, "cabinet scientists," have arrived, or, at least, hinted, at the same conclusion to which a woman-genius has come, at the end of the nineteenth century, by the aid of all that scientific instruments and facilities of experiment can afford.

Now, I will state some of the observations of the Rabbis, which have no other than an historical interest.

The woman at the period of menstruation presents the following phenomena: "Yawning; stretching of muscles of the body; wind in the bowels; feeling of heaviness in the head; irritation at the umbilicus and at the orifice of vagina, and formication." (*Nidda*, sec. ix, m. 8).

"A child one day old, if it sees blood, is unclean."¹ (*Ibid*, sec. v, m. 3).

"Five kinds of blood are unclean in women: Red, black, saffron color, like the color of the water of Beth-Kerem, and like the color of Sharon wine." (*Ibid*, sec. ii, m. 6).

"Once in fifteen, twenty, twenty-eight, and thirty days." (*Ibid*, sec. ix, m. 8).

No definite quantity of the discharge is given.

"Women in menstruation are like the grape-vine (*Ps. cxxviii*, 3); there are vines that yield red wine, and others that yield black; some produce much, and others scantily." (*Ibid*).

R. Jehuda, following the train of thought of the above, said: "Every grape-vine yields wine, and those that do not are sterile."

¹This may be either a hyperbole, or, for the purpose of making the law of cleansing more astringent, a method which they called *Geder*, erecting a "fence" around the law, so that no mistakes be made.

This opinion of R. Jehuda, that absence of menstruation indicates sterility, was shared by all his confrères, and among the signs of a sterile woman is included also absence of menstruation.¹ A peculiar chemical (?) test was employed to differentiate between menstrual blood and other coloring matters :

"Seven materials are passed over the stain : Saliva of an empty stomach ; juice of peas ; urine (stale) ; alum, soap, Kamunya and Ashlag."² If the stain disappears it is menstrual blood, if not it is dye." (*Ibid.*)

In a discussion about the period³ in the life of women when they are permitted to have sexual intercourse without using a witness, the following⁴ are enumerated : "A young girl ; in pregnancy ; in lactation, and an old woman. When is she called a young girl (Bethulah) ? Before the establishment of menstruation. When does pregnancy commence ? From time of quickening. When does lactation end ? When the child is weaned. What is meant by an 'old woman ?' When her woman friends call her so. R. Simeon said, when she is called 'granny' and she is not ashamed." (*Ibid*, Babli, p. 9. *Ibid*, Yerush, p. 49.)

¹ If a husband becomes aware after marriage that his wife does not menstruate, he may divorce her (Gittin). Sterile woman was called *Ala la noth* ; from *Ayal*, a ram—ram-like. The following are the symptoms : Breasts are not developed ; voice masculine ; no hair on pudenda ; the labia do not protrude, and absence of menstruation (Yeba noth Babli).

² Rashi, the great Talmudical commentator interprets the two last as "two herds used for cleansing the hands."

³ The Talmudists were careful not to give any definite time of the cessation of the flow, probably for the same reason as stated in previous note.

⁴ The napkin is called "witness" (Ed.) Before and after each sexual intercourse, the wife as well as the husband, had to "examine the witnesses," lest there be found menstrual blood, in which case the law prescribes an immediate separation.

"The blood of menstruation is dirty (mixed with mucus); the blood of ruptured hymen is clean; the first is of a red color, the other is not; the blood of menstruation comes from the uterus, while the blood of a ruptured hymen comes from the walls of the vagina." (*Ibid*, Yerush, last page.)

"Napkins should not be made of colored cloth or hemp; but of cotton or white wool." (*Ibid*, Babli, p. 17.)

"A woman may menstruate shortly after death." (*Ibid*, p. 71.)

The subject of Rules, which is treated in different Tractats of the Talmud, and especially in the Tractat of Nidča,¹ if gathered together and condensed would fill a large volume. Suffice it to say that the laws are very rigid, and they were obeyed to the letter. I will give a few instances by way of illustration.

"When a Nidda is in the house no priest² ought to enter it. (Lekoch Kemach, quoted in Pachad Yitzchok.)

"She is not to eat with him³ (husband) at the same table unless they put something on the table to remind them of the state of things, or else make a partition." (Sabbath Babli, p 11.)

¹"Separatio; Impuritas mulierum menstrua. Buxtorf." The word is derived from Nod, to wander, isolate, whence "the land of Nod" where Cain dwelt after he "went out from the presence of the Lord."

²The great anxiety not to pollute the holy vessels of the Temple by the menstrual flow is illustrated, by a story told of a servant girl of R. Gambiel who carried wine for the Temple, and she "examined the witnesses" between one pitcher and the other. (Nidda, Yerush, p. 49.)

³The dread of the husband and the tricks they employed to get out of the way of temptation is simply astonishing. Itzhok Bor Joseph had a large kettle placed in bed between him and his wife while she had the menses. Palti Ben Laish, it is said, used a sword as a partition. (*Ibid*, p. 49.)

A pathetic story is related of a man "who read much, studied much, and served the wise men much," and died in the prime of youth. His wife, grief stricken and distracted, took the philacteries (Thephilin) of her dead husband, and went from one college to the other asking the Rabbis: "Is it not written in the philacteries 'To love thy God, to hearken to his voice, and cleave to him, for he is thy life and the length of thy days?'" (Deut. xxx, 20.) Nobody answered the poor woman. At last she came before R. Simeon. He asked her, "My daughter, how was it during menstruation?" "Heaven forbid," she answered, "he did not touch even my little finger." The stern old man¹ again asked: "And during the seven cleansing days?" "He ate with me, he slept with me in one bed, but he never attempted to do anything else." The venerable R. Simeon arose, and in a devout manner slowly said: "Blessed be the Lord who is the righteous judge, for it is said (Levit. xviii, 19) 'And a woman in the sepa-

¹There are Jewish young men now who can remember the time when they were little children, and wondering at the strange behavior of their parents at certain intervals for the period of ten or twelve days. For instance, while at the table mother would not sit in her usual seat, near the husband, but between two children, or further away; she would never hand the soup to father, but let somebody else do it, or place it on the table where he could reach it. When one forgot about the whole affair and touched the other, the second party would start as if pierced by a dagger or bitten by a snake. Yet they were friendly; they talked gently one with the other, and, it seemed, even more obliging and solicitous than at any other time. The most mysterious instant for a child, was when on an early morning, around the table, father would touch mother, and she would give him a significant glance which the children could not understand, but if it was not missed, it was a sure sign that the strange fits were about to come over father and mother.

ration of her uncleanness shalt thou not approach.' ” (Sabbath Babli, p. 102.)

The Rabbis endeavored always to give some rational reason for certain laws and statutes of the Bible. Concerning the law of Nidda, the following two reasons are given :

1. The children born of cohabitation during menstruation will be lepers. (Nidda, Midrash Robba and Thauchma, section Metzora.)

2. “ Why has the Thorah (Law) prescribed that a Nidda should count seven days? Because he (the husband) is familiar with her, and gets tired of her, and may dislike her; therefore, she shall be unclean for seven days, so that she may be as dear and beloved by him as when she entered for the first time under the chuppa (canopy). ” (Nidda, Bab., p. 31.)

Of vicarious or irregular menstruation there is no mention in the Talmud, except a solitary case of the latter. A woman came to R. Eliezer with a stain, desiring to know whether it was menstrual blood. R. Eliezer, as the Talmud tells us, was a great expert in the analysis of such cases, and he said it was caused by great sexual desire which was not gratified. The woman confirmed it by telling that her husband was away, and she was thinking of him, and then she noticed the blood.

I think that the view of R. Eliezer of the cause of irregular menstruation is more logical, if not true, than the theory of Emmett (*alte und Moderne Theorien der Menstruation*), which I omitted at the beginning of this essay, a theory which would make all woman-kind blush, and which announces to the world that “ the menstrual fluid is due to uterine congestion caused by *orgasme veneris*. ”



